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SUBJECT: FINALLY, A SHORT PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION SEASON
BEGINS

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¶1. (U) On March 6, the official presidential campaign was launched by seven candidates. Out of the seven, only two -- incumbent President Ivan Gasparovic and SDKU Deputy Chairwoman Iveta Radicova -- are genuine contenders. The first round of voting will be held on March 21. If no candidate earns more than 50 percent of the votes (of eligible voters), a second round will be held on April 4. Although the current margin between Gasparovic and Radicova, is, according to the polls around 20 percent, some analysts (and Radicova supporters) think a Radicova victory in the second round may be in reach if she can mobilize the youth and undecided votes.

Gasparovic: Support from the Socialists and Nationalists

¶2. (U) Gasparovic and Radicova lead (by far) a field of seven candidates. In one poll conducted in mid-February, Gasparovic held a 55 to 33.3 percent margin over Radicova in the first round. The difference diminishes in the second round, to 56 to 43. The other candidates are polling in the single digits: former Parliament Speaker and Conservative Democrat MP Frantisek Miklosko (4.6 percent); Chairwoman of the marginal Free Forum Party, Zuzana Martinakova has 4.6 percent. Martinakova's husband served until recently served as Gasparovic's domestic advisor and it is widely believed that her candidacy's sole goal is to reduce Radicova's support among women. The HZDS candidate, a heretofore unknown university professor named Milan Melnik has 1.7 percent; two communist party candidates, Milan Sidor and Dagmar Bollova, have not gained even a percentage point.

¶3. (U) The leaders of Smer and the Slovak National Party (SNS), Prime Minister Robert Fico and Jan Slota, lent their presence to the launch of Gasparovic's campaign. In televised speeches, they appealed to the Slovak citizenry to cast its vote for Gasparovic, as the best representative of Slovak values and national pride. Fico pointed out (inaccurately) that it was Gasparovic who was invited to the U.S. to sign an agreement on the Visa Waiver Program. Slota highlighted Gasparovic's national orientation and said his loss would be a "tragedy" for SNS and Slovakia.

¶4. (U) Gasparovic, as the official candidate of coalition parties Smer and SNS, has garnered a good deal of media coverage and visible Smer support at a number of recent public events. Gasparovic will join PM Fico at events next week marking International Women's Day, for instance. Not all of the media focus has been positive, however. On March 5, the daily Sme reported that the dean of the Technical University in Bratislava required all professors to attend

the speech Gasparovic delivered there. Gasparovic attracted criticism for the content and timing (as close to the official start of the campaign as possible) for his annual "state of the union" address.

5.(U) Perhaps more damaging, after several verbal slips and mistakes, some media outlets speculated that Gasparovic was suffering from Alzheimers. This rumor -- which Gasparovic's office tried to quash immediately with the issuance of a medical certificate testifying to his good health -- has been nurtured by Gasparovic's former colleague and long-time bete noir, Vladimir Meciar. Comment: An interesting, if disturbing, related incident occurred when the Presidential Palace's decision to ban a reporter from new FM Lajcak's swearing-in ceremony because she had aired clips of Gasparovic's verbal lapses.)

Radicova: Must Mobilize Youth and Energize her Campaign

5.(U) The second place candidate, former Minister of Labor and Social Affairs Iveta Radicova, launched her campaign in a decidedly low-key fashion: with a series of book signings at Bratislava shopping malls. At the events, she identified her main principles as support for the rule of law and defense of citizens' rights. On the eve of the official campaign launch, SDKU Chairman Mikulas Dzurinda sent emails to thousands of SDKU supporters urging them to get out the vote. Radicova is also supported by the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) and by factions of the Christian Democrats (KDH). Although embosfs have not been successful in securing a meeting with candidate Radicova recently, we communicate with her via Facebook.

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16. (U) Radicova's perceived social liberalism -- she supports maintaining legalized abortions, for instance -- has been the main cause of KDH's lukewarm attitude. Recently, several bishops helped to ignite the Slovak "culture wars," by publicly calling on Catholic voters not to support her. Banska Bystrica's Bishop, Rodulf Balaz, recently went as far as to indirectly compare Radicova to Hitler because of her attitudes toward abortion and gays. (Comment: After Balasz's remarks, he and Radicova met one-on-one at her request, after which Radicova told the press that there was no bitterness or disagreement between them.) According to sources within SDKU, Radicova can win in a second round, but many in the party are critical of what they describe as a somewhat disorganized and lackluster campaign. Many were surprised, for instance, when Radicova named as her spokesman, Jan Fule, who served the same function for former President Schuster.

It Will Be Over Soon...

17. (SBU) Although the office of the Presidency in Slovakia is largely ceremonial, a Radicova victory would serve as a symbolic and rhetorical counterpoint to the policies of the ruling coalition. Gasparovic, while a stronger booster for transatlantic ties than the Prime Qnister, has basically Qrved as a rubber stamp for the Fico Government. Unlike some of his predecessors, most notably Michal Kovac under then-PM Meciar, Gasparovic is content to go along quietly with his PM's agenda. On those rare occasions when he differs, it's either theater (as in the case of his veto of the compromise textbook law -- ref a) or of negligible import, e.g., holding up Ambassadorial appointments.

18. (SBU) Given the sorry state of Slovak politics -- a few bright spots notwithstanding -- most voters we talk to are only too glad that the Presidential campaign will be mercifully short. Although today is the launch of the official campaign, it's already been a source of levity (or despair) for some pundits. The recent suggestion by

Miklosko's top ally, former Interior Minister Palko, that parents be given the same number of votes as they have children falls in the former category; Bishop Balasz's attack on Radicova in the latter. Somewhere in between was KDH MP Daniel Lipsic's now-infamous gafQ, in which he linked his support for Radicova with public expressions of regret for the second Dzurinda government's alleged involvement in a vote-buying scheme (ref b). Following Lipsic's mea culpa, PM Fico and Parliament Speaker Pasko spent the next week lambasting Radicova for "benefiting" from past malfeasance.

¶9. (U) In any case, the billboards make for amusing and occasionally revealing viewing. Radicova looks kind behind professorial glasses; her slogans evoke courage and hope. Martinakova, meanwhile, looks as if she has had one too many procedures around the eyes. Her slogan -- a broadside at Radicova -- is "a President needs more than courage." The unknown Melnik's ad is unintentionally funny: it labels him a "personality for the world, with a heart for Slovakia." Given PM Fico's still enormously high ratings, it seems that Gasparovic has hit billboard paydirt: an image of him, together with Fico, under the heading: "together for Slovakia."

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